

The Place I Call Home by orphan_account

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Summary:

If one was to ask Mike Wheeler's parents whether their son had a girlfriend, they'd scoff. Awkward, lanky Mike speaking to a girl? That's ridiculous. But little did they know, though, that their son was very much in love with a girl. A girl of very few words. A girl with very curly hair. A girl... whose heart was as fragile as the raw emotion one gets during a sunset. A girl that -- to Mike, was like no one he had ever met.

1. The Beginning

Author's Note:

Mike's Heart!Eyes-O-Meter: 30 %

Her hands were freezing cold, lips chapped and hair soaking wet.

All of the physical traits that a teenage girl would usually squeal in despair about was what this girl had. Yet, to Mike, she was beautiful. *Very pretty*. Even though the girl in front of Mike looked so frail and tired, her eyes radiated everything that she physically was not -- the way she faced him with her hazel-brown eyes without looking away gave away her desperation and genuineness.

Mike was never the type to easily make new friends. Even though the tender age of fourteen usually was a time in people's lives where friendships were easily made, it didn't apply to Mike the same way. It wasn't that he was shy, but rather, he had too many interests that he liked that kids his age didn't. The principle of electromagnetic fields, biocellular mechanisms, astrophysics... stuff that the kids in his class found to be useless pondering by their science teacher Mr. Clark were all very fascinating to Mike. This made it somewhat difficult for him to befriend the kids in his class, since the majority of them liked things that *he* didn't like (sports, weak opinions of the *X-men* series).

A few boys in his class were an exception, though. Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers and Dustin Henderson were all very smart boys who, just like Mike, were obsessed with science-fiction and comic books. Friendship meant that you'd get to share your favourite things with another person -- whether it was a great comic book or deep, complex thoughts about a virtual reality that might exist within the dimensions of the world we call ours. Or worlds, one would argue. This, of course, makes it much easier for Mike to not feel obligated to entertain the idea of having the need to befriend *everyone* he meets, or is in his class. Not that it wasn't possible, just, not preferable.

But due to the current given circumstances, the girl that sat in front of him (and in his room much less) was making him question this principle that he had set for himself.

"Do you... need anything? Water? Or, uh, food?" Mike asks clumsily as he scratches his head, not really knowing whether he should call his mother for help (since, you know, adults know the best) or use the *supercom* to call his friends for help. Although either idea seemed like a bad idea nonetheless. The fact that he found this girl on Mirkwood all drenched and shivering was such a confusing encounter. He had found her behind a rock with her hands covering her ears, as if she was running away from someone. Having had tried calling out to ask whether she needed help (and receiving nothing in reply), he was just about to run to the nearest phone until the girl had taken her shivering hand in his as she uttered the words "please" ever so quietly. And as a result of a series of guessing and a *lot* of quick thinking, Mike finally decided to take the girl home to offer as a shelter from whatever she seemed to be running away from.

"... Clothes?" she says as she pinches her soaked hospital gown. This gesture leads Mike's eyes to travel to her wrists. *Was she getting IV fluids?* Although he knew that she was in a hospital gown, his hasty decision-making made him ignorant towards the possible risk the girl might have been in. An adult would've been mortified by his actions. Heck, even Mike himself was rather confused and... well, not really thinking.

"Right, of course. Wait here." he replies with a mental note of not stuttering. He goes through his closet, throwing almost everything around him, and finds some warm and dry clothes for her to wear. He hands them to her carefully as he leads her to the bathroom door, assuring her that she'll get her privacy of changing in there. But just as he was about to shut the door completely, the girl stops him. Her hands were surprisingly small compared to his own, he thinks to himself as her voice draws back his attention.

"I- No." she blurts out, her hand's tension alert and eyebrows furrowed. This was weird, and made Mike question a lot of things about not only this girl, but girls in general. Was he not a boy to her? Not that she needed to feel embarrassed or anything, but rather, it was a bit of the opposite. Trying to hide his red face, Mike wipes his cheeks with a cold hand and blinks at her in question.

"Okay, well, um, how about we just keep the door-" Mike says

carefully as he shuts the door a little bit, "like this. Is that better?"

The girl's face softens, and with a small nod in reply, Mike walks as far away from the bathroom as he possibly could to let her mentally note that he was *not* some pervert. After all, that was what Nancy would call Dustin every time he'd try to storm into her room with food -- *as one rightfully does*. Respecting a girl's personal space and therefore privacy was something that he'd learnt from his sister that girls always wanted. Or needed. Either way, Mike was in a rather uncomfortable, confusing position at the moment, and he did not know what to do. He would check his possible options of finding a solution to his very sudden problem, but trying to somehow solve it only reminds him why he didn't see an option for a solution in the first place.

He was insane.

This was insane.

When the girl was done changing, Mike starts to build a small fort with chairs, blankets and cushions for the girl to have a place to spend the night. Whenever Mike was nervous, he'd start babbling away about random things to put his mind off to somewhere far from his embarrassment. Mr. Clarke had often warned him about this as feedback on his presentations during classes, but thankfully, he could conveniently put his babbling to use as he and the girl was building the fort. Everything from his favourite Star Wars character to how much P.E. sucked, Mike's endless topics seemed to put the girl at ease as she would occasionally crack a small smile at his silly remarks on how his P.E. teacher was fatter than half of the class combined or on Dustin's ridiculous obsession with chocolate pudding. Soon enough, Mike was finding himself very much enjoying the little fort that the girl and he made. Talking to strangers, *much less to girls*, was never this easy, but somehow, this girl was very easy to talk to. One would, of course, note on how little she was speaking compared to himself, but it somehow didn't matter. It was nice to have someone actually listening to you. The girl's gaze was so genuine, so full of curiosity, that it made Mike feel like an actual storyteller. Someone whose words were of worth.

When Mike finally comes to a pause of his babbling, he carefully

looks over to the girl to check whether it seemed like a good idea to ask about herself. What was her name? Why did she... was she running away from something? From someone? Why was she in a hospital gown?

The boy usually always questioned everything around him, so the fact that he had so many questions would've come to no one's surprise. But being too afraid to scare the girl away from him after have had seemingly won her trust, he chooses the one question that he finds the most important.

"My name's Mike. Short for Michael. What's..." he gulps and holds his fists in nervousness before he proceeds on asking, "what's your name?"

2. The Mountain Answers Back

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike violates the party's "rules of thoughts", and El meets the boys.

Mike's Heart!Eyes-O-Meter: 60 %

Her name was El.

Not Eleanor. Or Ellen.

Simply -- *El*.

Never would Mike have thought that a name that consisted only of two letters would belong to a person as interesting and stunning as the girl he would soon enough get to know. All his life, he'd thought only people with names like *Samwise Gamgee* or *Faramir* (if you could call them people, that is) could have interesting lives, doing interesting things. He had personally been very disappointed with his parents' decision on naming *himself* plain ol' Michael, and even more so at his sister for not suggesting a different name in their process of picking names when she had the benefit of being *alive* before he was born (because, you know, *he* certainly didn't). Why didn't they name him something cool, like *Venkman* from the Ghostbusters? A name was supposed to draw out the possible futures that one had destined upon oneself. Surely if you name a child a name with a cool back-story, the child would have a future with many adventures to hold.

And yet, despite of having such strong opinions on names, he found himself to dismiss this belief completely when it came to El. Lucas would've been so disappointed in him if he knew about this, but to Mike, El was a pretty name. *A pretty nice name.*

You're seriously going to break the party's number thirty-third rule of thought? Come on, Mike!" he'd say with his signature disapproving face. But see, the one thing that Mike wasn't aware of was that it wasn't quite the name that mattered too much, but rather, El became

a name that belonged to the girl whom he would get to know so much about. Whom he'd learn about, and care about.

A lot.

And the thing was, she would no longer just be any girl, or "the girl". She was El.

El, whose curls were out of control in the wind.

El, whose smile was rare but so beautiful that it'd probably light up a room filled with miserable people.

El, who listens. Who cares. Who will take Mike's hand in times when Mike feels his nerves taking over whatever life threw at him.

The two of them spoke all night that day. One would've expected the both of them to be exhausted from their long day of encounter, but quite frankly, it didn't matter. Although Mike never ended up asking El about why she had escaped the hospital that night, he figured that she probably wasn't ready to talk about it. Heck, she probably wasn't able to sleep with her thoughts on it anyways, which became the main reason for Mike to keep his conversation going with El throughout the night. She probably didn't want to think about it.

It's quite fascinating how much first impressions take a toll and change completely by the amount of words two individuals exchange with each other. The fact that two people from completely different backgrounds, or places for that matter, can hold a conversation face to face and suddenly find things that they like to share with each other would be something that a sappy story-teller would call *destiny*. *Kind of funny that word*, when you think about how many people live by letting life take it's own course and flow naturally in order for things to happen to them. But when you think about it, it's not that easy. The decisions one makes, the emotions one gets, all of such factors become mere details that *becomes* you.

Mike knows this. He may only be a fourteen years old kid who cares about science-fiction characters more than real people, but even someone like him is aware of how unreasonable the word *destiny* is when you break it down into elements that relates to real life.

Destiny was fictional in his book, and probably also one of the party's rule thoughts while we're at it.

But for the first time in a while, Mike finds breaking rules of thoughts within the party not as scandalous as his three friends usually make it seem to be.

Because the encounter he had with El, whether it was for better or for worse, was definitely something that he considered to be destiny.

"You're telling me, that this girl was found on Mirkwood in a hospital gown soaking wet and you *took her home*."

If you'd ask Mike, he would try to convince you that Lucas wasn't always kranky. Lucas was cool, and always came up with great ideas for different plots during *Dungeons and Dragons* sessions. By living only a few blocks away from Mike, the two boys grew to really like each other's company. Despite the fact that the four boys were quite unlike each other, the fact of them being friends remains, and is supported by the fact that it's certainly *because* of their differences that has made them become a functional — as they would call it, *party*. Lucas the logical being the Ranger, Dustin the dauntless being the Bard, Will the Wise being the Cleric and Mike the Merciless being the Paladin.

To Lucas' defence, it *is*, after all, an unmentioned law to call out on your friends' bad decisions when you see them. Which, from the fact that Mike is Mike, Lucas gets to do a lot. And not only for Mike, but also for Dustin. And Will, although not as much, since Will's decisions were usually reasonable.

"What if she has *autoimmune diseases*, Mike." Dustin says with flailing arms.

"-Actually, Dustin, autoimmune diseases are non-contag-" Will was about to point out, but gets cut off by Dustin's dramatic bodily movements as he asks El, "Do you have *cancer*?"

It was the day after Mike's first encounter with El. A Saturday afternoon, which was a day that was meant to be used for the party

to hold meetings regarding important *stuff* such as preparing their Ghostbusters' halloween costume for next year (*for next year*). As per usual, Mike's three friends had rushed up the stairs to meet him, only to find him asleep beside El's fort, which had somehow collapsed all over the place.

Finding Mike with a girl at his own house (*in his own room*) turned out to be just as confusing as Mike had found it to be. He had been trying to explain the little things like how he found her and how she seemed to be in trouble, but none of the things that he had brought up were plausible enough to rightfully be logical enough of a reason for Mike's decision to take El home. The fact that he didn't exactly know *why* she was in a hospital gown wasn't too helpful either.

"Look, okay. So her name is *El*, not *Eldo* or *Eribilous* — I really don't understand why you'd want to make up random names for her, Dustin — and I figured she needed my help! Wouldn't you guys do the same if you were me?"

In a unison, the three boys answers Mike with a flat "no" and furrowed eyebrows, which Mike sighs and rolls his eyes to. "Okay, what *ever*, guys. But we absolutely shouldn't tell any adults, at least not now."

Something that Mike learnt over a course of the many interesting conversations that El and him shared was that if El didn't like something, it'd be easily visible. That in itself sounds like a bold statement, considering the fact that it comes from someone who barely have gotten to know El for less than twenty-four hours. But it felt natural to be aware of how El felt. Although she didn't speak as much as he'd like her to , she would always make sure to deliver whatever she felt in the most righteous way possible.

But just as Mike was about to come to her defence, *again* (something he's been doing for every question-attack that his friends were swinging at El), El puts her cold hand over Mike's, and speaks with her clear, ringing voice and eyes adjust.

"Papa."

She inhales.

"My father, he- he's-"

"Mental?" Dustin asks as he bobs his head, earning a smack from Mike at the neck.

"...Mental." El repeats Dustin's words to see whether it suited him. The thought of his existence had always been a burden to El, and to call him names was never something that she even *dared* to cross her mind. But having found her new-found friend, *and potential friends*, she feels comfort. And safety.

'*You're safe.*' El thinks as she holds her fists to ease her anxious emotions to reply to Dustin. "Yes. Okay, that works."

And with a deep breath, El proceeds on telling the boys about the man she calls "papa".

3. To Build A Home

Summary for the Chapter:

Eleven shares her story.

Notes for the Chapter:

Tell me what you think about my writing style in general! Hopefully it doesn't come off as too annoying (because let's face it, you'd be drunk by now if you took a shot for every time I mention the word 'love' in this chapter, haha)!

Thanks for reading!

- Recommended Song: *To Build A Home by The Cinematic Orchestra*

Love is defined through various of factors. By different people, in different places, at different times.

Love is about timing. Love is an emotion. Love is what you make it. And because there are so many ways to define love, it becomes hard to give it a text-book definition of what it really is. Love, in which is an emotion that is so complex that it can trigger physical reactions of the human body. Our cheeks become flushed, our hearts become warm, our lips curl into smiles -- all the small, physical reactions that you experience through the emotion of love that we find ourselves in are merely details that lets us believe that love actually exists. That love is not a myth, and it is as true as you can feel it to be when you touch hands with a person you love.

But what if... you become *afraid* of love? What if love became a distant concept that only made sense on television, or could only be read in books?

To El, love had always been a concept that only reached to the surface of what one could express. The love that was defined as warmth, as acceptance, as a bond -- because El had never

experienced it herself, it was hard to believe that it existed.

And because a concept that seemed so strong was so foreign to El, she became afraid of love, and for what it stood for.

Love was a word that was thrown around by her father a lot in various of situations that didn't have anything to do with him loving El at all.

Locking her away in her room because he loved her. Making her home-schooled because he loved her. Never letting her meet her mother.

Because he loved her .

Words that were supposed to express the love that El's father wanted her to feel so badly were covered in layers of sharp needles that she had to prickle herself through to really find what he was really trying to say. To find the love that he was seemingly trying so hard to convey to her required too much bleeding before the raw emotion of what her father defined *love* as could be reached.

Most people would have a hard time telling you about their parents' bad side. Superficial details that didn't mean much would often be chosen to be told instead, because some things were better kept under wraps. Every family had their own problems, so this wasn't anything peculiar. It would be irrational to expect that parents were perfect beings, even if they would seem to be so for their children who knew of nothing else but them. Every parent had flaws. After all, despite being the superheroes that they strived to be for their children, they were people first. But as a child, their parents are their only source of defining 'rights' and 'wrongs'. So how can one expect a child as young as El to know how *wrong* her father was?

How wrong he was about being loved by others was a weakness. How wrong he was about school being a place that only 'fed children with sinful knowledge'.

How wrong he was, about not letting her meet her mother.

El escaped. With a heavy heart and a longing for the type of love that Robin Hood showed his fellow villagers, or the type of love where

she would feel a hand touch her cheek ever so gently to tell her that she's going to be alright, *that she was going to be safe*, El ran away from home with her feet bare and hands curled into small fists in frustration over thoughts of 'what-ifs' and make-believes. El escaped from a place that mimicked what one would call a home. Her father was there, yes, but so was everyone else that shared her father's beliefs.

Through hours and hours of running as far as she could, she fainted from hydration. She didn't faint because she was weak, she refused to think that. But sometimes, being vulnerable puts us in different perspectives of life. It makes us realise that even people whom you didn't know could share their love and care by lending a hand. And rightfully so, someone nearby had discovered her just in time before the cold night fell. But for El to end up at the hospital wasn't a good thing. El was saved, yes, but she knew, that if she stayed any longer at the hospital, her father would be able to find her.

And so here she was. In Hawkins.

It was perhaps too early for El to establish Hawkins as her new home. After all, it wasn't as if she was expecting Mike to lend her his home forever, especially when she slept over at his place without any of her parents knowing that she even existed. It baffles her still, that Mike decided to blindly let a girl in a hospital gown enter his own home. He was so loyal, so honest and genuinely wanted to help her, which to El wasn't something she was used to. Throughout the night of her stay at Mike's, he had been so careful with his words of not mentioning or questioning too much of how she ended up where she was when he found her. She was so grateful for his stories and dorky laughter. But she didn't want to burden Mike for too long, because after all, she had to find a way to help herself. But how? She didn't know, and neither did Mike and the boys after they got to hear the full story of El's escapade. But one thing remained true; Mike could absolutely *not* tell his parents about her, or else she'd slip back to her father's care again.

El let's out a deep exhale after she had finished her story. It was very unusual for her to speak so much, and even more so in front of so many people at the very same time. Having never been to an actual school, kids around her age were usually not often encountered by

her. Every stranger, young or old, was taught to her to be a 'bad person'. But having had met Mike, she was slowly realising that one can only be their own judge of the 'rights' and 'wrongs' that they encounter.

And at that moment, to trust the boys with her story was a gut feeling that assured her about being the right choice.

And so it was.

Because a year later, El and the boys had become very good friends.

4. The Snowball

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike cannot dance, and that is a fact.

Notes for the Chapter:

Happy New Year peeps! A lighter chapter today.
Hope you enjoy it!

- Recommended Song: Riptide by Vance Joy (cover by Cameron Douglas)

Being a teenager has never been easy, no matter what generation you're a part of. It's ironic that once one gradually becomes an adult, the raw emotions that you get to experience as a teenager fades and eventually becomes forgotten. Things that you get to experience for the very first time becomes a precious, nostalgic memory that slowly becomes fragmented away. Ask anyone, and they would express how much of a shame it is to not be able to experience such genuine emotions towards the smallest things in life again. It's like wanting to re-read your favourite book, except instead of getting to experience the book in a new perspective of someone whom has become more mature, you get to have your jaw drop at every plot twist that you already know at the back on your hand.

If you were to ask El about where she'd end up in a year without having had met Mike on that particular rainy day, she would've probably not even dare to think about what possible outcomes there were for her. But that gut feeling she had did not fail her, and she gets to completely disregard the possible outcomes of an El without Mike.

With the help of a very grumpy (but just as warm-hearted) local officer named Jim Hopper, El got to become fostered by him in attempts of avoiding being sent back to her father. It was a year-long battle to make the government redeem her father as an inept parent. You see, her father was a very charming man whom by no means

seemed to be inept to care for a child. He had a high status within society, being one of the heads of the church that he was a part of. But thankfully, by El escaping made it slightly easier to use it against him. The repeated excuse that Hopper would use was for the government to explain how a responsible parent would make their child *escape* from them? Sure, teenage outbursts were pretty common, but not in this case. This was something else.

A year's worth of laughter became more than El had ever expected to experience. Dustin's silly attempts to make a move on Mike's sister Nancy, Will's pretty drawings of the imaginary worlds that they get to discuss about, and even a girl named Max whom El got to befriend and share chocolate pudding with at lunch were experiences that El never would've thought that she'd get to experience. It was so unusual, to not only bend her words in effort to please and earn a rigid smile from her father. She was actually speaking for herself. She was smiling -- not for a crowd of helpless people whom seek guidance from whatever her father considered to be God, but for herself. She was genuinely happy, and it felt so great.

The children were all gathered at their usual meet-up spot; Mike's house. With excited squeals on the topic of the Snow Ball from Max and Lucas, the rest of them were baffled by their sudden excitement towards what they'd usually agree to be a rather lame event. It was very suspicious, the rest of the boys thought, especially when they knew how much of a skeptic that Lucas usually was. The snow ball had always been a place where lame socialites hung out. There would be loud music; music that they would've heard over and over again over the radio because that's how radio and one-hit wonders work, sweaty boys in suits that are probably a size or two too big for them because their mothers don't want to bother spending another fortune on buying them another suit next year, girls who smell of perfume that seemingly would last for weeks -- based on these details alone made it clear for the gang to be side-eyeing the event as a place for "normal kids". But as edgy as these kids wanted to be, it didn't take much for even them to get excited for an event like that. Especially with a guy like Steve Harrington, whom has been crowned prom king a few times too many for his own good (and ego at times).

"You know what you lack, Dustin?" Steve asks without expecting an

answer from the kids as they all were gathered around in the living room with Mike's mother lurking in the corner with a camera. "It's confidence. You've got it all! The looks, the smile, the-the-"

"-*Smartness?*" Dustin says with a cheeky grin as he wiggles his eyebrows at El, earning a giggle from her. "You know, Steve, I've heard that girls really like smart boys."

This sentence alone makes Max roll her eyes. *Boys*, right? Especially boys (or men, depending on personal experience and conversational encounters you've had with Steve Harrington) like Harrington always seemed to know *so much* about girls when in the end of the day all that's left for the mystery behind a girl's needs of a boy is whether he's a normal human being or not. Normal as in, do you wash your hands after using the toilet? Or, can you use a knife and fork *at the same time?*

"Smart boys are only smart if they're smart enough to not foolishly admit that they are." Max scoffs as she pats Dustin's back a little too hard. "What Steve's trying to say is that it doesn't really matter what you lack or don't lack; as long as you're having fun, you're good!"

As the conversation led on to borderline (but rather funny) debates between Max and Steve, El feels her hand being led away to more quiet room -- the dining room. Mike hand was very cold, but had a firm grip that indicated that he had something to tell her.

It's rather funny, how they could understand each other without really exchanging any words at times. People would scoff at their friendship if they knew that they were already very fond of each other after their first night of knowing each other's existence, but it was true. It was as if no words were needed to reach a mutual understanding between the two of them sometimes; weather it was about pranking Will or getting through a bad day -- it became a very natural thing to simply be there for each other without having pressure in the air.

When mike established that it was safe to speak without having his mother shoving a camera in their faces or having Steve and the rest of the kids getting all weird about the two of them holding hands, he lets go of El's hand and taps her head as if it calmed himself down.

"Okay, not to make this weird." he starts as he fidgets his hands in his pockets or twirls his thumbs or claps.

"You're already making this weird." El says with a smile. The fact that Mike had an awkward way of starting his sentences during a beginning of a conversation never changed, but which she was secretly very thankful for because it gave her a sense of familiarity of Mike as a person. It was exclusively him, and you'd know this if you knew him the way the rest of the kids did. The way El did.

"Yeah? Yeah, okay. Uh, sorry. Well, I just wanted to say, that, uh, I don't know how to dance. And we're going to the Snow Ball." he quickly goes through his words as if lifting stress from his chest. The only thing left for him to look like he was completely confused was to sweat. But it was December, which meant it was still very cold. Because you know, it's Hawkins, the town of very grim weather no matter what season it's supposed to be.

"Well, if it helps, I don't know how to dance either. I mean, I'm sure the only one who *actually* knows how to dance among us is Max since she's from California." El assures Mike, which didn't seem lessen how fidgety Mike was being.

"Right, right. So you don't know how to dance," Mike starts as he points at El, and then points at himself, "and I don't know how to dance, I think we should-"

"El? I thought you kids were supposed to be at the ball at seven?" a booming voice is suddenly heard from the main entrance door, waking a sleeping Ted Wheeler up from his nap and gathers everyone's attention and Mike's sigh as he side-eyes at Hopper, who was side-eyeing him back as he enters the house.

"Heya Mike, didn't see you there. A joy to see you're here, kid." Hopper chuckles sarcastically as he ruffles El's hair, which Max groans to since she *just* helped out with her hair.

"Well *surprise*, it's my house after all." Mike mutters back, earning laughter from everyone in the house.

5. Shelter

Summary for the Chapter:

The friends talk about their future.

Notes for the Chapter:

It's been a minute.

Since I've only recently gotten back to writing, my way of writing has felt a bit out of touch and almost foreign to me. But hopefully this short chapter has kept the style that I've been using for this story!

As always, thanks to all the kudos and comments you've all given me! It means a lot to receive feedback for something that you've spent time on, and have grown to love.

[music](#)

Emotions come and go, and yet the world somehow always manages to stay at the same place. The first time Mike held El's hand, the first time he got to hear her hearty laugh -- the first moments that he had with El became the type of memories that you'd talk to your friends and family about over and over because of how much they had become to mean to you.

It was the year of Mike and his friends to turn eighteen. A time in their lives where everything seems to have been figured out, and parents' words were only additional lectures that they were too familiar to bother with. *'I know, I know'* becomes somewhat of a standard answer to words that they weren't listening to, and the future seemed so scary and exciting at the very same time.

Change is a very and usually occurs when you least expect it, which in itself is probably exactly why it's such a scary concept. Becoming

eighteen felt like any other birthday they had experienced, and yet, it was so different. They had the right to vote, they could buy cigarettes... this newfound freedom of being labeled as an adult when purchasing tickets at the train station gave them the same giddy feeling you'd feel when your parents were away for the weekend and you could watch TV while eating cereal in bed without being scolded at.

Turning eighteen also meant that you're about to start, or is already attending, college. What would be your major? What's in for the future? Is it socially acceptable to just ignore invites to house parties when you just want to be at home watching soaps or hang out with friends playing dungeons and dragons? Probably not. But it never mattered anyway, so why should it start mattering in college?

"I've always wanted to be an astronaut." Dustin thought out loud. The five friends were at the café near the cinema, waiting to get in to watch "Back to the Future". The concept of time traveling had always been a concept that sparked curiosity amongst the kids, although most of the time it was a topic that could be passionately discussed for hours until the point where boredom would strike Lucas and Max to hit their friends with a stick to move on.

"That'd be so cool." Will chimed, "Dustin the astronaut has a ring to it."

"But isn't it really hard to become an astronaut? I mean, everyone has probably dreamt of becoming one as a child... but to actually become one-" Lucas started, but with a meaningful look from El, he shut up with raised eyebrows as to realize that he was going off again with his truth police stance. Clearing his throat, he corrects himself, "I mean, I could definitely see you becoming one. But I heard the odds of become one is one in ten thousand!"

"Which is barely one percent of the population here in Indiana, *I know*." Dustin shrugs, "but with the right work out to become fit and the brains, which I believe I have, I'll probably be able to do it."

"You'd be a great astronaut." El says with a smile, earning a fist-bump from Dustin. "Thanks El. What about you guys?"

Mike thought for a moment. What *did* he want to become in the future? His mind had been so occupied by the momental things lately that he didn't even spare some time to actually think about what he wanted to do with his life in the future. After all, now that they were seniors in high school, it meant that he would probably be separated from his friends because of university, and they would never be spending time with each other the same way they had always done ever again.

And so, with this in mind, Mike had been trying to meet his friends almost every day since they started senior year. The future was so out of his own grasp, and the only way to for him to find control over the things around him was to go back to routine. Go back to familiarity.

And go back to El, who grounded him every time he'd feel his head spin and palms sweat over how frustrated he was over the fact that he couldn't make time stop or moments last.

She was his comfort. His own little sanction that has saved him from so many moments where he felt his chest would swell and eyes wouldn't stop from spilling tears of being overwhelmed with his surroundings. How funny it was, Mike would often think, that El who was almost half as tall as himself was the one who'd stand on her tip-toes as she attempted on patting his head as she'd whisper the words "it's going to be alright" to him with full intent of hoping that her words would come true. To think that she thought he was the one who saved him was so ridiculous to Mike.

Dustin's question hung in the air. No one quite knew how to answer.

"I've decided to go to Boston." El's voice suddenly says, as if sweeping away all of the lingering thoughts that the five friends were having. "I know it's a bit sudden... but I've been thinking a lot, and I've decided to major in literature."

El has changed quite a lot since the first time Mike met her. Her eyes that were once filled with fear and uncertainty was now glimmering with hope and excitement over what will come next. Her voice that once was so small and trembled so much that it spilled all over the place was sound and clear when spoken in a room filled with people. She was glowing with new-found self-confidence, and Mike loved it

so much. Everything from her hands to her lashes that brushed her cheeks when she closed her eyes were mental images that he wanted keep forever. The small hand squeezes in class, or the piggy-back rides back after losing a bet. To be able to experience such things in high school was too good to be true for Mike Wheeler, whom was so accustomed to being made fun of by bullies whose ego were bigger than their heads.

But for El to take so many steps ahead of Mike made him confused. Lost.

Where would he go to take shelter if his sanctuary was going to part ways with him?

Mike had been slightly afraid of making new friends because of how attached he'd become to the things and people he loved. He knew that it wasn't healthy to be this way, since it was only natural for things and people to come and go. He didn't like the way he selfishly held the things and people he loved so close to his heart, as it must be a bit, if not at all times, suffocating for them. But at the tender age of eighteen, it just seemed too far-fetched to be so understanding, so mature, enough to a point where he'd understand. He barely understood himself, so how could he ever understand or know how to feel about this?

"Good luck! I'm sure it'll be great fun." Dustin says as he reaches to El for a high-five with a sheepish grin, managing to break the silence that no one quite dared to break as all eyes were set on Mike, who looked like he'd left his body.